

Liberia: Supporting Civil Society In Liberia's Electoral Process

National Democratic Institute for International Affairs

Final Report
May 15 to August 15, 1997

I. SUMMARY

From May through August 1997, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) provided technical and material support to Liberian civic organizations as they prepared for the first presidential and legislative elections since the end of Liberia's civil war, which began in 1989. The July 1997 elections took place after a peace accord brokered by West African governments in Abuja, Nigeria in 1995.

As a result of recommendations from an assessment mission conducted by NDI in April 1997, the Institute opened a four-person field office in Monrovia on June 1, and began program activities in collaboration with a loosely-organized network of Liberian non-governmental organizations known as the Liberian Elections Observers Network (LEON). NDI's program specifically focused on providing support to domestic election monitoring efforts and increasing voters' understanding of the electoral process through a community-based voter education campaign.

On July 19, 1997, Liberia held peaceful elections for which LEON trained and deployed more than 1,200 domestic observers to monitor voting operations in all 13 Liberian counties. International as well as LEON domestic observers described the elections as genuine and transparent. Immediately following these historic elections, NDI organized a post-election roundtable that brought together for the first time candidates and/or their representatives, political party leaders, members of the election commission, LEON and other civic organizations to evaluate the electoral process and to provide recommendations on consolidating the country's democratic transition.

NDI's program in Liberia achieved its objectives by strengthening the capacity of Liberian NGOs to recruit, train and deploy 1,200 nonpartisan domestic observers. NDI enabled the NGOs to carry out a community-based voter education program that reached an estimated 100,000 people. Additionally, by organizing a roundtable discussion shortly after the elections, NDI provided a forum for Liberian political and civic actors to evaluate the election process and make recommendations for the future of Liberia's nascent democracy.

II. CONTEXT

A. *Political Background*

Liberia's seven-year civil war, led by Charles Taylor and the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), began as a popular uprising against the unpopular regime of then-President Samuel Doe. However, the war unmasked ethnic and factional divisions and quickly spread throughout the country. Only after 13 peace accords and seven years did the fighting cease. The war left several hundred thousand casualties and displaced more than a million people.

Following the signing of the Abuja Peace Accords on August 19, 1995, Liberia began moving towards a stable peace. In the early months of 1997, most of the benchmarks set out in the Abuja Peace Accords were being met, including: the disarmament and demobilization of armed combatants; the repatriation of significant numbers of refugees and displaced persons; the resignation of government officials who intended to be candidates; and the establishment of an independent election administration commission. In planning to participate in these elections, some of the former militia leaders transformed their armed groups into political parties. Political parties that existed prior to the civil war resurfaced and began mobilizing their members in preparation for the elections, then-scheduled for May 30, 1997.

Despite Liberia's long history of nominally democratic governance, Liberians had very little experience with meaningful elections for public office. Prior to the civil war, the only contested national election since the 1950s was the controversial election of 1985, during which the Doe government was accused by Liberians and the international community of having manipulated the process to stay in power.

By mid-April 1997, legislation to govern the planned elections had still not been finalized. The lack of an electoral framework prompted many Liberians including Archbishop Michael Francis of the Liberian Council of Churches (LCC) to call for a postponement of the election date. Political parties and nongovernmental organizations subsequently echoed the Archbishop's demand, with the exception of the National Patriotic Party; which adamantly opposed changing the election date. Following appeals from civil society, political parties and religious leaders, the Election Commission petitioned ECOWAS¹ and the date of the election was postponed to July 19, 1997 to allow more time for preparations. In advance of the elections, ECOWAS increased its ECOMOG forces to provide security for the electoral period, and deployed 18,000 peacekeepers throughout the country prior to the elections.

B. *NDI Program Background*

¹ *Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which is currently chaired by Nigeria, formed ECOMOG, a peacekeeping force comprising troops from ECOWAS member states.*

Based on NDI's long-term interest and commitment to democratization in Liberia and indications of an increased commitment to peace and multiparty elections, the Institute conducted an assessment mission to Liberia from April 13 to 21, 1997. NDI's four-member delegation consisted of Project Director of the Ghanaian Network of Domestic Election Observers (NEDEO) Dr. Baffour Agyeman-Duah, NDI Senior Consultant Keith Jennings, NDI Senior Program Officer for Civic and Political Organization Lisa McLean, and NDI Program Officer for West Africa Celena Slade.

The assessment mission allowed the Institute to reacquaint itself with Liberian political and civil leaders; gain firsthand knowledge of efforts to create democratic institutions in post-conflict Liberia; and identify specific NDI programming that could be beneficial to Liberians in both the short and long term as the country prepared to return to democratic rule. While in Liberia, the delegation met in Monrovia and Buchanan with government and election officials, including: members of the reconstituted Council of State; presidential and legislative candidates; representatives of Liberian civic organizations; political party leaders and activists; and other independent observers, such as journalists, academics and members of the donor community.

The assessment team compiled a report that offered insights on the state of political developments in Liberia and provided recommendations on technical assistance that NDI could provide in the pre-electoral, electoral and post-electoral periods (*See Appendix i*). The team also recommended longer- term programming by NDI, provided that the Abuja peace process continued to hold.

III. NDI PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

A. Coalition Building Effort - Formation of LEON

At the end of its assessment activities in April, NDI held a meeting with representatives of the seven Liberian NGOs, with whom the delegation met to discuss the formation of a coalition to monitor the general elections and provide community-based voter education assistance. The organizations included the Movement for Democracy and Elections in Liberia (MODEL), the Press Union of Liberia (PUL), Liberia National Democratic Elections Monitors (LINDEM), Liberia Democracy Watch (LDW), Liberian Women Initiative (LWI), Independent Monitors for Democratic Elections (IMODE) and the Justice and Peace Commission (JPC). The groups that comprised the coalition possessed a wide variety of organizational capacity, and came from different ethnic, religious and social backgrounds. NDI advised these groups to form a coalition that would allow them to combine their resources, improve their collective credibility as nonpartisan observers of the political process and more efficiently reach a wider audience.

Following the meeting with NDI, the seven organizations formed a coalition for enhancing transparency and increasing voter awareness during the elections. The Liberian Elections Observer Network (LEON) was officially inaugurated on May 23, 1997, and attracted considerable local press coverage (*See Appendices ii & iii*). The coalition was awarded a \$75,000 sub-grant from NDI and provided with copies of NDI's "how to" Domestic Monitoring Manual and other materials on coalition building. As part of its support for the coalition, NDI staff provided training and advice throughout the electoral period on organizational development, effective coordination with political parties, election officials, the press and the public.

B. Domestic Monitor Program

1. National-level Training

Before Liberia's civil war, the only contested national elections since the 1950s took place in 1985 and were viewed widely by both Liberians and the international community as flawed. Based on the mistrust surrounding past elections in Liberia, as well as the possibility of intimidation in a post-war environment, NDI decided to undertake programming aimed at enhancing transparency, deterring fraud and increasing the chances that the July 1997 elections would be conducted in conformity with Liberia's laws and international standards.

From June 20 to July 15, 1997, NDI and LEON began the domestic monitoring initiative by organizing a series of "training-of-trainers" workshops for Liberian election observers at the national and county levels. Because of the concentration of displaced persons in the Monrovia area, NDI and LEON focused the initial domestic monitoring effort in and around Monrovia. The effort began with a workshop that was held on June 20 to 21 at the University of Liberia in Monrovia for Liberian trainers at the national level.

The workshop sought to strengthen the capacity of Liberian NGOs to train and deploy election monitors throughout Liberia and to enhance the participation of civil society in the elections. More than 240 participants took part in the workshop which was run by an NDI team of international domestic monitoring experts, as well as LEON executive members. The international trainers included Dr. Baffour Agyeman-Duah of the Network of Domestic Election Observers (NEDEO) in Ghana and Tracy Gartenmann from NDI Mali. These two trainers had been involved in domestic monitoring efforts in Ghana and Mali, respectively.

The topics discussed at the workshop were: the purpose of election monitoring; the roles and responsibilities of nonpartisan observers; the code of conduct; the strategies for election observation; and the post-election responsibilities of observers. Recognizing that in Liberia's fractionalized post-conflict environment, the success and credibility of the network depended largely on the manner in which the volunteers were recruited and trained, the NDI trainers laid emphasis on nonpartisanship and transparency throughout the program. Independent Elections Commission (IECOM) representatives Dr. Evelyn Kandakai and Mr. Momo Kanneh also addressed workshop participants on IECOM's preparations for the elections and its expectations concerning the domestic monitoring effort.

Following the national workshop, county coordinators were appointed to organize training workshops in each of the 13 counties and to train citizens on the issues discussed during the initial national training. Two LEON members liaised with IECOM regarding the accreditation of LEON's observers. They also created a medium for information sharing between IECOM and LEON in order to increase IECOM's confidence that LEON was operating in accordance with the code of conduct of observers. Because the LEON domestic monitoring effort was the first in the history of Liberia, regular communication between the commission and LEON was essential in enhancing the commission's confidence in the concept of domestic monitoring.

2. *County-level Trainings*

From June 22 to July 12, a series of domestic monitoring training workshops were held in each of the 13 counties of Liberia. These county-level trainings attracted from 50 to 120 participants each. The county-level training provided participants with information in a simplified format on the same topics which were covered at the National Training, such as: the roles and responsibilities of observers; the code of conduct; the strategies for election observation; and the post-election responsibilities of observers. By July 12, more than 1,200 observers had been trained and selected as observers through the "training-of-trainers module." The national trainers later received follow-up training on the importance of maintaining nonpartisanship as an observer, deployment, review of election-day procedures and reporting requirements.

NDI assisted LEON in the development and production of materials for use during the training seminars and on election day. A comprehensive Domestic Monitoring Manual, tailored for the Liberian electorate, was developed (*See Appendix iv*). The manual was used extensively during the national and county-level training workshops and was distributed to trainers throughout the

country. A brochure was also designed to explain further the role of observers and their election-day responsibilities. Additionally, an election day checklist to facilitate the reporting process and a LEON T-shirt were distributed to each domestic observer.

3. *Challenges and Responses*

While co-organizing the domestic monitoring effort, both NDI and LEON faced tremendous logistical challenges, many of which were exacerbated by Monrovia being the capital with the second highest rain fall in the world. Seven years of war had left bridges bombed out and roads in disrepair, with some completely washed away by the heavy rains. Many polling sites were in remote areas that could only be reached by boat or helicopter. Telephones were not available outside of Monrovia, and public utilities were not operational, leaving the vast majority of the population without electricity and no means to communicate beyond their immediate surroundings.

Due to the lack of infrastructure, and with approximately 1,800 polling sites scheduled to be covered on election day, LEON deployed observers to every polling site in the seven most populous counties, while maintaining a relatively reduced presence in the remaining six county capitals. LEON collaborated with IECOM and the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) to arrange for helicopter transportation for coordinators assigned to remote counties.

4. *Election-day Activities*

Despite logistical difficulties that in some cases required observers to walk for an entire day to get to their assigned polling sites, more than 1,200 LEON observers monitored the voting in 1,223 polling stations on election day. LEON observers monitored all aspects of the election day activities, including the opening and closing of the polls, the casting of the ballots and the vote count and tabulation processes. Following the vote tabulation, LEON observers finalized their reports and submitted their observation checklist to the county coordinators, who then transported the checklists to LEON headquarters in Monrovia for final review and compilation of findings. These findings allowed LEON to form a comprehensive and national perspective on election-day activities.

Based on observer findings, LEON issued a preliminary post-election statement on July 21, 1997 (*See Appendix v*). The statement outlined some irregularities in the registration process, including problems related to the very high rate of illiteracy among Liberians. These problems had caused many voters to request assistance, thereby impeding their ability to maintain the secrecy of the ballot. However, LEON stated that the elections were “free, fair and transparent” and publicly commended Liberian voters for conducting themselves in an “extremely impressive manner.” LEON attributed the smoothness of the election to the positive attitude of the Liberian people.

C. Community-based Voter Education Program

1. National-level Training

In pre-election surveys it was estimated that more than 80 percent of Liberia's citizens were illiterate. Additionally, the vast majority of the population residing outside Monrovia had access to only one source of information -- a short-wave radio transmitted by Kiss FM radio, owned by then-presidential candidate Charles Taylor. In light of this paucity of information, NDI and LEON decided to organize a voter education effort that targeted those Liberian communities that were unable to receive the nonpartisan voter education programming that aired on Monrovia-based radio.

NDI worked on the voter education initiative with LEON organizational representatives from the Justice and Peace Commission (JPC) and the Liberian Women's Initiative (LWI). JPC and LWI had been actively involved in civic and voter education prior to LEON's formation. Members of these two organizations formed the backbone of the coalition's Voter Education Committee.

In preparation for the community-based voter education training, NDI and LEON published a moderator's guide on: the meaning and importance of elections; what positions were being contested and the methods of voting; what the registration process would be; and election day procedures, with an emphasis on the secrecy of the ballot; and measures being taken to safeguard the integrity of the count (*See Appendix vi*). A portion of the guide produced by NDI and LEON, entitled "The Ten Principles of Voting" was widely aired on several radio stations and became a popular feature of radio programming in the period leading up to the July 19 elections.

Two members from LEON's Voter Education Committee liaised with IECOM. This cooperation allowed LEON to secure space on IECOM helicopters for the voter education moderators to travel to areas of Liberia inaccessible by road. NDI and LEON also produced a poster-size sample ballot to be used for voter education. The sample ballot proved to be an extremely useful tool for providing illiterate Liberians at the grassroots level with a visual aid on the ballot and voting procedures.

On June 27, NDI and LEON organized a National Voter Education Workshop, in which 60 people from 15 different LEON member organizations participated. The workshop was held in Monrovia at St. Theresa's Convent. Trainers for the workshop included: IECOM Commissioner for Voter Education Tiah Nagbe; Liberian Legal Counselor Taiwan Gonglow; Director of the Justice and Peace Commission Samuel Kofi Woods; LEON Chairman Abraham Massaley; NDI Field Representative for Voter Education Vernice Guthrie; NDI Program Officer for West Africa Celena Slade; and NDI Program Assistant for Voter Education Jawah Gray. The training addressed moderation techniques, organization of community meetings, the content of the moderator guides, and key aspects of the electoral system such as proportional representation and the rights and obligations of voters.

2. *County-level Training*

Following the pilot training session, 16 county coordinators and 30 voter education moderators were selected to conduct community-based voter education in Liberia's 13 counties on the same topics that had been covered during the first workshop. The moderators laid emphasis on the secrecy of the ballot. Most of the moderators conducted workshops in their residential areas and were therefore able to situate their newly acquired skills in the local political context. The moderators focused on target areas such as market places, schools, churches, mosques, hospitals, displaced persons centers, and other community gathering areas.

3. *Traditional-Leaders Training*

To maximize the dissemination of information at the grassroots level, NDI and LEON planned a training workshop for traditional leaders. The traditional leaders were essential to the success of a community-based voter education initiative because of the prominent cultural and leadership roles that they play in Liberian society. During the civil war, as governmental systems disintegrated and traditional structures were disrupted, the traditional leaders' role as a stabilizing presence became even more important.

More than 60 traditional leaders attended the traditional leaders workshop held on July 7, 1997. During the workshop, these leaders expressed a lack of familiarity with the proportional representation system that was to be implemented during the July elections for the first time in Liberian history. They also indicated that because the information that they received would be shared with their communities it was unfortunate that no other workshops had been planned for them. Following the first workshop for traditional leaders, more than 100 other traditional leaders who had not participated in the original workshop traveled to Monrovia to request that another workshop be held for them. In response, a second traditional leaders' workshop was conducted by NDI and LEON on July 17, 1997.

D. NDI Post-Election Roundtable

On July 30 and 31, 1997, NDI, in collaboration with the Center for Democratic Empowerment, Liberian Women's Initiative, Justice and Peace Commission, Press Union of Liberia, Liberian Council of Churches and LEON, sponsored a post-election roundtable. The roundtable -- the first in the history of Liberia -- brought together members of the NGO community who were involved in the electoral process (including voter education facilitators and election monitors), political party representatives, the media and representatives of the international community, to discuss lessons learned from the 1997 elections. NDI designed the program to provide an All-Liberian forum for open discussions regarding the challenges to democratization in Liberia and a venue for eliciting recommendations on how to respond to these challenges.

The first day of the conference was devoted to lessons learned from the election. The opening plenary entitled "The July 1997 Special Elections and the Results" examined broadly the

administration of the elections, the election timetable and the role of the international community. Subsequent workshops focused more specifically on domestic monitoring, voter education, the role of political parties, the role of the media, and the role of women.

The second day's activities included discussions about the future of democratization in Liberia. Executive Director of the Justice and Peace Commission Samuel Kofi Woods spoke on the need to "Create a Democratic Governance Framework for Liberia." Former Interim President of Liberia Dr. Amos Sawyer spoke on "The Role of Democratization in Any National Reconstruction and Development Program," while the United States Ambassador to Liberia, William Milan, spoke on "United States - Liberia Relations in Post-Election Liberia." The closing plenary was entitled "Peace and Democracy: The Road Ahead for Liberia." Archbishop Michael Francis and Sheikh Kafumba Konneh of the Liberian Interfaith Mediation Committee served as key-note speakers.

During the post-election conference, Liberian participants made a wide range of recommendations on ways to help strengthen democratic institutions in Liberia. Some of the principal recommendations read as follows:

- ◆ The newly elected government should establish a legal framework to encourage tolerance for diverse view points and address popular expectations that all Liberians, including those in government, will abide by the law;
- ◆ The government should encourage and facilitate meaningful and constructive participation by the various political and civic organizations in the political process;
- ◆ Political parties should accept the results of the July 19 elections as the best option for peace and build upon lessons learned from those elections to improve preparations for future elections in the country;
- ◆ Civic education, election monitoring and women's participation in politics should be encouraged and enhanced; and
- ◆ Training and assistance should be provided to members of the newly established democratic institutions, such as the legislature, to enable them to understand their roles and responsibilities in contributing positively to the democratization process in Liberia.

Participants agreed to reconvene in six months to follow up on the recommendations put forth at the July post-election conference and to evaluate progress made in the area of democratization in Liberia.

IV. RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

For the first time in Liberia's 145-year history, domestic observers were accredited to monitor elections. The 1,200 domestic observers were recruited and trained by NDI and LEON. According to many Liberians and other international Liberia watchers, the LEON domestic monitoring initiative enhanced transparency and increased public confidence in the electoral process. By training LEON observers to monitor the process according to the guidelines outlined in the Special Election Legislation, the NDI/LEON domestic monitoring effort also increased the prospects that the elections were conducted according to the laws and procedures governing the 1997 Special Election

In the days following the elections, international observers from US-based organizations, the Organization of African Unity and the United Nations declared the elections "free and fair" and stated that the election represented a very important step forward for Liberia and its long-term prospects for lasting peace and democracy. Moreover, the US-based Carter Center and Friends of Liberia (FOL) international observers reported meeting LEON observers in at least 64 percent of the polling sites they covered (*See Appendix vii*).

The NDI post-election conference drew broad participation from all political sectors despite the fact that it was held immediately following the elections and prior to the inauguration. This provided a unique opportunity for all those involved in the elections, including NDI and LEON, to receive feedback from a wide variety of individuals who could contribute to the planning of democracy support activities in the future.

By providing a forum for Liberians to speak freely about the elections and the future of their country, the roundtable broadened the political space for civic participation in subsequent political developments in Liberia. By bringing together national and international figures to publicly express their views on democracy, reconciliation and the future of Liberia, the roundtable also began a national debate on the consolidation of democracy in Liberia. Specific recommendations were made on consolidating Liberia's nascent democracy, and plans were made to reconvene at a later date to examine progress made in the implementation of recommendations from the forum.

The United States Ambassador used the roundtable to issue his strongest public statement thus far on the United States expectations of post election Liberia. The roundtable received wide coverage in the Liberian media. The opening and closing plenaries were broadcast live on a local radio station.

V. EVALUATIONS/CONCLUSIONS

At the onset of NDI's program in Liberia, the Institute developed an evaluation plan to assess its progress towards its program objectives. Under the plan, NDI identified indicators for each objective and the means for measuring results. By using this plan, NDI was able to determine that its election-related program met its objectives to strengthen the capacity of Liberian civic groups to engage in the political process; enhance the prospects for more transparent presidential and legislative elections; encourage popular understanding of the electoral process; and promote public confidence in the outcome of the elections.

NDI achieved these goals by strengthening the capacity of Liberian NGOs to recruit, train and deploy 1,200 nonpartisan Liberian election monitors who later issued a comprehensive public report based on their observations. NDI also strengthened the capacity of Liberian NGOs to conduct a targeted voter education program.

The impact of NDI's program in Liberia was captured by Election Commissioner, Tiah Nagbe, during one of LEON's domestic monitoring training workshops seven days before the election. He stated that,

“The LEON effort is important even beyond the fact that a coalition of nonpartisan civic associations, who are more interested in the process than a particular outcome, will render an objective and neutral opinion on the electoral process. Much of Liberia's national sovereignty has been lost because of this terrible and senseless war, but LEON's activities in preparing to monitor on election day, and most importantly the counting of the ballots, represent a first step in making our country whole again. LEON's courage and determination have made us all at the Commission proud. We're in fact depending on you. Most Liberian citizens who see the blue and white t-shirts on July 19 will undoubtedly share the same feelings.” (July 12, 1997)

The history and reputation of Liberian civic organizations, such as the Justice and Peace Commission and the Liberian Women's Initiative, contributed to the success of the voter education effort in reaching a large audience. The exact number of people impacted by the community based voter education initiative may be difficult to calculate precisely. However, an informal survey of participants in the voter education efforts buttressed by an estimate on the number of Liberians that listened to the radio broadcast during the voter education radio programs, would indicate that LEON's effort -- combined with that of the Justice and Peace Commission and the Liberian Women's Initiative -- reached more than 100,000 people. The sample ballot poster created by LEON and distributed throughout the country by IECOM provided the only opportunity for the vast majority of Liberians to see a sample ballot prior to voting on election day. The popularity of the sample ballot enhanced Liberian citizens effort to vote in accordance with the rules of the Election Commission and provided a useful visual aid for voter education.

Furthermore, considering the deep societal divisions created by the civil war, the formation of the LEON network represented a significant step forward for Liberians from differing backgrounds to collaborate for a noble cause. The increase in LEON's membership from seven founding organizations to more than 20 organizations by election day increased Liberians' confidence in LEON as a credible and neutral coalition, and bolstered LEON's capacity to prepare an election report that would be widely viewed as nonpartisan and acceptable.

The cooperation achieved through the network, if sustained, would bode well for the democratization and reconciliation process in Liberia in the short and long term. Although LEON's original purpose was to monitor the election, the skills acquired during the electoral phase will further bolster the network's capacity to conduct other political development activities in the post-election period. NDI's in-country staff continue to offer technical advice and support to LEON as the coalition expands its mandate for future activities.

Based on the findings of NDI staff during the assessment mission, their assessment of this phase of programming and the post-election roundtable; as well as written requests by Liberian NGOs, political leaders and members of the newly elected legislature, NDI will conduct follow-on program activities in Liberia after the elections.

NDI's post-election program will be designed to raise the level of political awareness of Liberians about their individual rights and responsibilities in a democracy through a grassroots civic education program known as *Civic Forum*; strengthen the capacity of Liberian civic organizations to participate effectively in promoting citizen participation in the country's political process; and enhance the legislators' understanding of -- and ability to fulfill -- their duties as members of a democratizing society.

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